



China and Africa: Emerging Challenges to the Geographies of Power

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Abstract

Over the last few years, China has assiduously pursued stronger economic and diplomatic relations with many Asian, African and Latin American countries. In part, this is fuelled by its extraordinary economic growth, which has led to a boom in domestic resource demand, and the search for profitable markets and investment outlets. China is also seeking diplomatic support in challenging the inequalities of 'global' governance. For better and worse, China's rise will lead to changes in the present structures and loci of power in an uneven world. This review article examines one set of China's 'South–South' interactions through an historical account of Sino–African relations from 1949 to the present day. It points to the complexity of interactions between diverse Chinese and African actors, a range of opportunities and problems, and the dangers of a defensive response from the West, if based on unreflexive and unsophisticated foreign policy analysis.

Introduction

The geographies of power and development are resistant, but changing. Together with India and Brazil in particular, China presents an emerging challenge to Western political and economic dominance, as its phenomenal economic growth drives increasingly significant diplomatic, investment, trade and aid relations with Southern partners in Asia, Africa and Latin America (Harris 2005; Institute of Development Studies 2006). Not before time,¹ these changes are starting to stimulate serious academic and policy debates over 'China's rise'. Analysts from a wide spectrum of disciplines – including international relations, economics, history, political studies, development studies and geography – are paying increasing attention to the effects of China's burgeoning demand for raw materials and energy on global commodity prices and the terms of trade (Institute of Development Studies 2006; Kaplinsky 2005, 2006); the rhetorics and impacts of its foreign aid programmes (Manning 2006); its role and interests in the latest round of trade discussions at Cancun and Doha (Bradford and Linn 2004; Harris 2005; Humphrey and Messner 2006; Langhammer 2005); its growing diplomatic activity in Asia, Africa and Latin America; and to its challenge over who should have permanent membership on the UN Security Council, as well

as how to secure a fair voice in other institutions of 'global' governance (Bourantonis and Magliveras 2002). This review specifically analyses one set of regional interactions, namely, Sino–African relations from 1949 to the present day.

For many in Africa, China represents a complex mix of problems and opportunities, which will play out differently for different sectors (e.g. manufacturing and extractive industries), in different countries (e.g. oil producers and non-oil-producers), and between different actors (leaders, elites and ordinary people; rich and poor; consumers and producers; importers and exporters; local populations and Chinese immigrant communities, and so on). The extent to which China joins, changes and/or undermines international regulations and codes of practices on, for example, trade, the environment or arms sales, will all have major implications for the continent (OECD 2006; Zoellick 2006). For some observers, few African countries are taking a sufficiently strategic approach to securing their interests (Alden 2005a; Gaye 2006), and much of the interaction is currently driven by China. However, this may change as the relationship deepens, and others see tremendous potential (Shelton 2006). As we shall see, while many express serious concerns about China's support for corrupt and violent regimes, the flood of cheap manufactured goods, and its low employment and environmental standards, there is evidence that the Chinese government is becoming more attentive to its public image in Africa.

As China is making symbolically clear through its high level visits and forums, it values its economic and diplomatic relations with different African countries. Trade is growing rapidly, and its composition is important – Africa now supplies 28% of China's imported oil and gas (Eisenman and Kurlantzick 2006). The ability of the Communist Party to hold on to power in post-socialist China is in part dependent on its appeal to nationalism, and in part its remarkable economic growth (Hughes 2005). In order to secure and sustain this growth, and provide for the rising living standards and increased consumption demanded by its population, modern China needs global markets, suppliers and investment outlets, including in Africa. China is also seeking diplomatic allies, not just for its long-standing rivalry within the Republic of China (Taiwan), but as it engages with the processes of greater international political and economic integration. Having said this, given the widespread tendency to refer to 'the Chinese' in relation to Africa, it is worth pointing out that Chinese actors are of course diverse with at times competing and contradictory interests. The focus of most Western media and policy analysts is African governments, the Chinese government and the large Chinese state and private firms (although in practice the boundaries can be blurred). Even here there are differences, depending, for example, on the nature of their business (construction, import/export, manufacturing and extraction), and the specific circumstances of the country within which they are working. Thus, while some may be well served by a situation in which corrupt or authoritarian

African leaders can make deals, others profit more from political and social stability and improved commercial transparency and regulation. As well as these large firms investing in and trading with different African countries, there are also settled Chinese populations across Africa. They are often engaged in business activity, and may again have very different views of a desirable living and trading environment (Haugen 2006).

Finally, Sino–African relations are also of significance for the West. First, China's burgeoning ties with Africa, as with many parts of Asia and Latin America, are one element of its 'global rise'. While this trajectory has benefits for Western consumers and investors, it is also causing considerable anxiety among public and policy audiences.² This is not helped by often rather poorly informed debate in both the media and some policy circles. Johnston (2003) and Bates and Huang (2006) are among a number of observers who warn of the tendency within the US foreign policy community, for example, towards rather superficial, ahistorical, event-led and zero-sum understandings of China's economic and political agendas. How the West, and particularly the USA, responds and accommodates itself to changing Sino–African relations will be indicative of a much broader response to China's growth, indeed, critical to the unfolding of the 21st century (Arrighi 2005a,b; Peters 2004; Small 2005). More specifically, in relation to the Sino–African theme of this article, there are three particular concerns for the West. The first is development and good governance. As we shall see, China is accused of undermining efforts to improve transparency and accountability in Africa by financing and supporting authoritarian leaders and states, by supplying arms in conflict situations, by doing business without 'ethical' conditionalities, and by taking advantage of corruption. All of this, according to many in the West, threatens to undo the fragile gains that have been made in terms of democracy, transparency and accountability. The second issue is security. The post-9/11 security agenda has included a greater focus on 'failed states', counterterrorism activities and development. Compared to the 1990s, these concerns have contributed towards a much higher profile for much of Africa, and it is now firmly back on the West's geopolitical map (Brookes and Shin 2006; Kraxberger 2005; United States National Security Strategy 2002). China now represents at least a geopolitical complication in Africa, at worst a threat in its relations with states and groups potentially hostile to the West. Third, Western states and businesses are finding themselves increasingly in competition with China over securing resources. As oil prices have risen and governments and oil companies have sought to diversify sources away from the Middle East, the profitability and attractiveness of Africa's on-shore and off-shore oil reserves have grown and China is becoming a major player (Jaffe and Lewis 2002; Lyman 2005; E. Pan 2006; Widdershoven 2004). As the recent debacle over the attempted Chinese purchase of Unocal in the US demonstrates, this is framed not just as commercial, but as geopolitical competition. The neoliberal adherence to (preaching) the laws of neoclassical economics, the assertions of the value and necessity of competition, and the

arguments that a 'rising tide' that will lift all boats are suspended for a neorealist battle to secure energy supplies – a struggle that is likely also to be played out in Africa.

This brief review suggests that an informed analysis of these changing geographies of power and development requires attention to both the historical and contemporary complexity of China's relations with different African countries, and suggests that geographers can and should contribute more to rigorous analyses of the world's changing power geographies.³

Sino–African Relations Since 1949

Twentieth-century Sino–African relations can be periodised in a number of ways. Here I suggest three main eras: the Mao years (1949–1976), the first decade under Deng Xiaoping (1978–1989), and the post–Tiananmen Square years (from 1989).⁴ This section offers a brief overview of the shifting ideological, economic and political underpinnings of China's relationships with various African governments, or the national liberation movements that preceded them, since the People's Republic of China's inception in 1949.

Although there had been some limited contact between the PRC and some African leaders before 1955 (e.g. Walter Sisulu of the South African National Congress visited in 1953), it was the Bandung Conference of 1955 that initiated more sustained relations. The ideals, achievements, tensions and weaknesses of the Bandung meeting are exemplified in Sino–African relations during the 1950s to the 1970s (Camilleri 1980). At the conference, 29 Asian and African countries adopted the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence, which had initially been agreed by China and India in 1954. The main themes and declarations of the conference centred on respect for sovereignty, non-interference in the internal affairs of other nations, economic and technical cooperation, mutual benefit, the needs and rights of developing nations (including investment and the stabilisation of primary product prices), as well as peaceful co-existence. These assertions envisioned a multi-polar world, and stood as an explicit rejection of both European colonialism and US–USSR neo-imperialistic superpower rivalry. However, these aspirations were rapidly undermined by economic and political weakness, by tensions and rivalries between the decolonising and newly independent nations, and divisive pressures emanating from the West and the USSR.

Larkin (1971) argues that Maoist China's *long-term* goal in Africa was to encourage social revolution. A profound ideological commitment to the eventual spread of Chinese socialism was underpinned by identification with colonised and exploited nations. Yahuda (1978), for example, suggests that the humiliating national memory of the Opium Wars should not be under-estimated in explaining China's promotion of an anti-imperialist axis.⁵ In the short to medium term, however, Larkin argues that these ideological

imperatives were translated into the more modest aims of supporting anticolonial liberation movements, such as the National Liberation Front (FLN) in Algeria and the growing number of independent African states in asserting their economic and political autonomy. Of course, these foreign policy relations were also driven more tactically by the need to create allies to help secure the fledgling PRC. Thus, a pressing political factor motivating Chinese interest in Africa was the attempt to displace the Taiwan-based Republic of China at the UN, something it finally achieved in 1971.⁶ Twenty-six of the seventy-six votes in the PRC's favour came from African countries.

China's economic weakness and own domestic imperatives meant that solidarity was largely expressed through technical assistance (including doctors, nurses, agriculturalists and engineers), educational scholarships, diplomatic ties and delegations. But other forms of assistance were available, and included military equipment and infrastructural development, most famously the immense railway linking Tanzania and Zambia. China also offered loans and grants to various African countries that, while they were usually relatively small scale compared to other donors, were often granted on distinctive and very favourable terms:

In addition to consisting largely of intermediate technology, all Chinese aid projects are given without 'strings', and since 1964 without interest. Chinese workers are paid at the local rates, they train their local equivalents and the general aim is to leave projects in such a way that they can be locally managed, operated and maintained so that even the spare parts could be locally produced. (Yahuda 1978, 13)⁷

Although ideological and geostrategic considerations were dominant over this period, economic relations, while modest, were not unimportant. Trade relations often served to bolster alliances. In 1955, for example, China bought 15,000 tonnes of Egyptian cotton, earning Egypt's gratitude at a time when it was having difficulty selling it to the West. In a similar manner, China bought 2 million tonnes of tobacco from Tanzania in 1965, which it had been unable to sell to its normal purchasers. On a number of occasions China accepted payment in kind, helping newly independent nations with very limited levels of foreign exchange. However, on other occasions, commerce was foremost, and indeed, at times economic imperatives superseded and even undermined politico-ideological agendas (Hutchinson 1975; Larkin 1971; Taylor 2000). The growing Sino-Soviet rift of the late 1950s and the early 1960s also eroded some of the goodwill generated by these policies, as Africa became one of the theatres of Sino-Soviet rivalry. Diplomatic relations were broken off with some countries that were deemed to be too close to the USSR, such as Angola, while there was clear geopolitically driven competition for the support of others. On a number of occasions Chinese foreign policy in relation to different African countries was driven more by opposition to the Soviets 'revisionists' and their allies, than to the Western 'imperialists'.

How did different African movements and states respond to China over this period? Obviously the various political and ideological dispositions, situations and preferences, and the role of specific governments and leaders all influenced their diverse and changing relations with China (Brautigam 1998; Camilleri 1980; Larkin 1971; Snow 1988, 1994). At various times, many welcomed the example China provided of national autonomy; its identification with the oppressed nations; its demand for greater equality and justice within the world system; its model of discipline and frugality; and its moral, financial and technical support, usually with little or nothing expected in return. But many African leaders were also cautious of Chinese ambitions and agendas, particularly during periods like the Cultural Revolution, when Maoist fervour over-rode more pragmatic, long-term and sensitive approaches. Moreover, some African leaders were unwilling to alienate the USSR, and Sino-Soviet duelling did not improve China's reputation in the continent (Snow 1994). Thus, while Guinea and Mali congratulated China on its successful nuclear tests in 1964, others were more circumspect, and some even openly critical. In 1965, Jomo Kenyatta, President of Kenya said:

It is naïve to think that there is no danger of imperialism from the East. In world power politics the East has as much design on us as the West and would like us to serve their own interests (quoted in Larkin 1971, 138).

Overall, the period between 1949 and 1978 was marked by diverse but generally deepening relations between China and different African nations. Abraham (2005) argues that the Non-Aligned Movement that arose from the Bandung Conference never lived up to its promise. Certainly in relation to China and different African countries, we can find divisions, betrayals, weaknesses, tensions⁸ and simply insignificance – but we should also note success stories in relation to trade, political solidarity and general cooperation, and, importantly, its legacies in many parts of the continent today. China is not a new player in African affairs.

The late 1970s and 1980s marked a shift in Sino-African relations as Mao's ideological fixations were eclipsed by the more pragmatic approach adopted under Deng Xiaoping. Although trade increased over this period, there was a turn away from ideology as a determinant of foreign relations. For the Chinese leadership, rivalry with the USSR and support for anti-imperial struggles became less important than securing economic growth. Taylor suggests that:

In stark contrast to China's position in the 1960s and 1970s, exhortations and propaganda grounded in Maoist foundations disappeared, for the 'socialist modernisation' project of Deng Xiaoping demanded economic investment and a non-conflictual approach to international politics. As a result, non-ideological relations with the United States, Western Europe and Japan based in expanding trade links and co-operation took a priority in China's foreign policy formulation. (Taylor 1998, 443)

Overall, Chinese aid to Africa declined, as did the number of delegations and visits that acted as a rough benchmark of diplomatic ties and political solidarity. Taylor suggests that Africa's poor economic situation, which worsened almost everywhere in the continent over the 1980s, and its peripheral place within global politics (including in relation to Sino–Soviet relations), further militated against Chinese interest. Snow (1994) observes that although there was still a rhetoric of South–South cooperation and solidarity, the reality was increasingly hollow, and African nations confronted a 'cold new realism' in Chinese diplomacy. China's focus was on its own modernisation, and its scarce resources were deployed to that end rather than to aid Africa (Yahuda 1983). Economic pragmatism was the order of the day. For example, between 1976 and 1980, Chinese exports to Nigeria rose from \$128 million to \$378 million; and overall trade with Africa rose by 70% in this period (Snow 1988). So too did other forms of economic activity, including paid Chinese consultants and technicians. But, according to Snow (1994), aid pledges fell, and this too with more of an emphasis on practical benefits to both recipient and donor. Having said that, Brautigam (1998) notes that China's aid commitments of \$258.9 million in 1984 still made it Africa's sixth largest donor.

In this periodisation, the third and most recent phase of dramatically accelerating Sino–African relations can be dated to 1989, when democratic uprisings in China were followed by swift reprisal – Tiananmen Square acted as the iconic space in which resistance and repression were played out and globally observed. Taylor (1998), who examines the effect of this event on Sino–African relations in detail, argues that its negative reverberations in the Western world both alarmed and angered China, prompting it to seek political allies, including from Africa. This was by no means a one-way process. A number of African leaders, none of whom would have welcomed democratic judgement on their own rule, sent messages of approval following China's authoritarian crackdown. Angola's foreign minister stated his 'support for the resolute actions to quell the counter-revolutionary rebellion', while Namibia's president sent a telegram congratulating the Chinese Army on their actions (quoted in Taylor 1998, 447). Snow (1994) and Taylor (1998) point to a shared perception among many Chinese and African leaders that Western critiques around human rights and democracy are founded in neo-imperialist arrogance. For some they are further evidence of the imposition of Western worldviews which, they argue, act – perhaps intentionally so – to restrain the economic development and political autonomy of the former downtrodden nations. Tiananmen Square put Africa back on the map for high level delegations and meetings (the Chinese foreign minister made 14 visits to African countries between 1989 and 1992); and for a dramatic increase in aid. Taylor points out that of 52 countries receiving Chinese aid in 1990, 24 were African. As we shall see in more detail below, it also encouraged China to assert a number of foreign policy principles as the basis for its return to a more internationalist foreign policy agenda, albeit

under very different internal and external conditions from those of the Maoist period.

While the events of Tiananmen Square may have helped launch renewed relations, in the last decade the more enduring driver of change has been the demands of China's booming economy, resulting in a sharp growth in trade, investment and joint enterprises between China and various African countries (Broadman 2007). Trade rose from \$12 billion in 2002 to nearly \$40 billion in 2006, and according to Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, this is set to rise to \$100 billion over the next 5 years (Wild 2006). China is now Africa's third largest trade partner, with more than 700 Chinese companies (and foremost among them, state-run enterprises) operating in 49 African countries. Smith (2005) argues that trade with China 'is more important to the [African] continent's prosperity than [Gordon] Brown's poverty-relief efforts', while Watts (2005) observes that, driven by China, in aggregate Africa's GDP rose by 5.8% last year, the biggest increase in 30 years. Chinese exports to Africa are dominated by manufactured goods, textiles and food grains. Imports include manganese, iron, fish, timber, copper and platinum. But for both economic and geostrategic reasons, it is China's quest for oil (and to a lesser extent natural gas) that has captured the most global attention. In 1999, Africa provided an estimated 18% of China's imported oil (Jaffe and Lewis 2002),⁹ a proportion that has since risen. China currently buys one-fourth of Angola's annual oil production, and 60% of Sudan's production. Nigeria, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea also supply China's growing energy needs. Increasingly, these are not just sourced through sales from the open market, but like other powerful nations, China is looking to joint ventures and the transfer of technology, capital and expertise for prospecting, developing and extracting oil, and its energy policies are now the subject of political, military and private sector economic analyses around the rest of the world (Breslin 2005; Lyman 2005). Although some authors rightly caution against the dangers of overestimating China's current economic strength and its share of global trade and investment relations, including with Africa (e.g. Breslin 2005; Segal 1999; Waldron 2005), there is less room for debate over the unprecedented acceleration and trajectory of Sino-African interactions.

These growing trade and investment relations between Africa and China must be set within a broader shift towards a more internationalist political agenda. High-level diplomatic and trade meetings are indicative of these deepening political relations, with 30 African heads of state or government visiting China between 1997 and 2004 (Muekalia 2004). Muekalia (2004) sums up Sino-African relations since 1949 in these terms:

China had gradually changed its tactics from confrontation to co-operation, from revolution to economic development, and from isolation to international engagement. (Muekalia 2004, 7)

Over the last decade, Chinese leaders have asserted a set of foreign policy principles that Joshua Cooper Ramo (2004) refers to as the 'Beijing

Consensus', although the coherence implied by the term is somewhat misleading, and more importantly, it is not a designation that the Chinese government uses or endorses. The principles are evident, for example, in the speech given by the President Jiang Zemin to the newly established Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), which met for the first time in Beijing in 2000.¹⁰ His speech was codified in the Beijing Declaration of the China–Africa Cooperation Forum.¹¹ Four main elements can be drawn out. The first is the assertion that the present world order is unjust and inequitable and that under these circumstances, 'globalisation currently presents more challenges and risks than opportunities to the vast number of developing countries'.¹² Developing countries (with which China – somewhat problematically – identifies itself) must therefore act together to:

[S]trengthen co-operation and consultation on multilateral institutions such as the UN and the WTO, so as to safeguard the common interests of the developing countries ... [and] co-ordinate positions on reforming multilateral economic and trade regimes and formulating new rules, with a view to increasing the collective bargaining capacity of developing countries and make efforts towards the democratisation of international relations and the establishment of a just and equitable new international economic order ... The Ministers agree to work for the reform of the United Nations and particularly the UN Security Council that will be geographically representative.

The second element is the right to national self-determination, a rejection of the right of other countries to meddle in internal affairs. Third, China urges greater South–South economic cooperation, with mutual benefits arising from investment, agreements, joint ventures, banking, technology transfer and so on. Thus, in the Sino–African context, Jiang announced that China would cancel nearly \$1.3 billion of African debt (further debt relief was offered in the FOCAC meeting of 2006 – see footnote 11), and lobby for greater debt relief from Western nations. Finally, China asserts a commitment to peaceful multilateralism, endorses peaceful negotiation of international disputes, nuclear non-proliferation, and the control of the illicit light arms trade. A striking feature of this undeniably very attractive set of principles is the absence of specific mention of human rights. China's stance remains distinctive from the liberal discourse of much of the West. The Beijing Declaration makes it clear:

Countries that vary from one another in social system, development level, historical and cultural background and values, have the right to choose their own approaches and models in promoting and protecting human rights in their own countries. Moreover, the politicization of human rights and the human rights conditionalities on economic assistance should be vigorously opposed as violation of human rights.

Ramo's term 'Beijing Consensus' explicitly invites comparison with the hegemonic Washington Consensus and its successor, the post–Washington Consensus. These have provided the dominant economic and political framework within which African and other postcolonial nations have sought

to develop over the last 20–30 years. Their central feature is a commitment to neoliberal growth strategies (privatisation, deregulation, devaluation, cutting subsidies, opening markets and export-led growth), which have been policed through Western, and specifically US-dominated institutions, particularly the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and World Trade Organisation (WTO). More recently, loan and grant conditionalities have become more explicitly political (they always were, of course) with democracy, good governance, decentralisation and anticorruption and transparency all being leveraged through debt; through political and representational hegemony within the forums of global governance; through military might; and through the willing cooperation of political and financial elites. Under the post–Washington Consensus, the ‘rollback neoliberalism’ of the 1980s and early 1990s shifted in focus to become increasingly directed toward ‘the purposeful *construction and consolidation* of neoliberal state forms, modes of governance and regulatory relations’ (Peck and Tickell 2002, 37). Critically, under the Washington Consensus and post–Washington Consensus, hegemonic development institutions and agencies have persistently sought to locate the causes of underdevelopment within the bounds of the nation state (Mawdsley and Rigg 2002, 2003). From the debt crisis, to the 1997 East Asian financial crisis, to the current focus on failed and failing states, the causes of poor development are identified as corrupt elites, poor policies, low capacity, social conflict and even geography and resource-endowment. All of these issues are indeed major factors in understanding the (lack of) developmental progress. But donor nations and multi-lateral agencies assiduously underplay or even actively deny systemic external factors for poor development – colonialism; the role of the multi-national banks and the US Treasury in the debt crisis; the instability of casino capitalism; the distorted world trade system; the impacts of externally imposed ‘shock therapy’ and structural adjustment; and disproportionate power and representation at the UN, WTO, IMF and other ‘global’ forums (Stiglitz 2002).

For many critics, the post–World War II structures of global financial and political dominance constitute a neo-imperialist system that institutionally and persistently favours the powerful over the weak. The poorest nations must open their markets and slash subsidies, while the richest continue to protect and support their producers and markets. The richest nations have massive, expert, permanent delegations to the WTO, while the very poorest nations sometimes have to share one representative. The UN Security Council, IMF and World Bank are overwhelmingly dominated by rich nation representatives and interests, while their decisions often impact most immediately and severely on the poor and powerless. For many Africans, Western interventions have been characterised by arrogance, failure, widening inequalities and a profound loss of sovereignty. Even recent efforts to promote transparency, participation, democracy and good governance can be seen as meddling (whether well intentioned or pernicious), resulting

in a further loss of national autonomy, and the erosion of citizen's rights (Harriss 2005; Cooke and Kothari 2001). There have been major development achievements over the past 50 years, but the record is geographically and socially uneven, and nowhere more so than Africa. In this context, it should come as no surprise that many ordinary Africans and their leaders may be more than a little sceptical about the claims to authoritative expertise by various Western governments, multilateral agencies and nongovernmental organisations; the (eventual) effectiveness of their prescriptions; or even the decency and altruism of their intentions (Mephram and Lorge 2005). The lack of conditionality and insistence on sovereignty articulated by the Chinese government might be attractive not only to authoritarian leaders but, for different reasons, to populations who have been at the sharp end of structural adjustment, budget cuts, trade inequalities, northern protectionism, highly priced drugs and water privatisation; not to mention the legacies of Cold War-sponsored violence and instability. The corollary of this is that Western claims to humanitarianism, justice and fair dealing may ring hollow. Chinese imports are bringing cheap affordable consumer products; its demand for raw materials and resources is having an unprecedented impact on many African economies; while its claims of Third-World solidarity and partnership offer more dignity and choice to nations usually geopolitically located as immature, disaster zones, recalcitrant or as a source of disease, instability, outward immigration and terrorism threats.

However, China's impacts in Africa are by no means only positive. Of particular concern is China's support for authoritarian and even genocidal regimes, notably Sudan (Large 2006) and Zimbabwe. China maintains that business is business, and that it has no right or wish to interfere in the sovereignty of other nations. However, while this may be true in terms of imposing governance and trade conditionalities, China is without any doubt a political player in Africa. Its recent threat to cut diplomatic relations with Zambia if the opposition candidate, Sata, won the 2006 General Election (Reed 2006) is a rare case of overt political pressure that is usually more discretely veiled.¹³ Economic relations on this scale are inevitably 'political'. In Zimbabwe, Chinese loans to Mugabe have helped to prop up his violent regime; while in Angola, a \$2 million loan, with the same amount promised, has allowed the corrupt dos Santos government to evade IMF demands for more transparent accounting of oil revenues. More generally, China has supplied significant arms to the continent, including to conflict areas. A second issue is China's apparent willingness to countenance corrupt trading practices, and ignore calls for greater transparency or social and environmental safeguards. As well as the consequences for just and sustainable development, some Western firms complain that they are in effect subject to a competitive 'ethical disadvantage'. However, there are signs of change, for example, in the 2006 FOCAC meeting, where a definite change of tone and language was evident, suggesting that the Chinese government is by no means

oblivious to its public image, or the challenge to present itself, in Zoellick's terms, as a 'responsible stakeholder' in international society.¹⁴

An issue of particular concern for many Africans concerns trade imbalances. Although the import of cheap manufactured goods from China has opened up whole new opportunities for poorer African consumers, it has also suppressed local production in some places (McCormick et al. 2006; Morris 2006). Indeed, the discontent has been so vociferous that China is starting to respond to these fears, prompted by African leaders facing protesting populations and declining terms of trade. At present, the complex short- and long-term outcomes for different sectors and countries of rising commodity prices, cheap imports, and the triangulation with world trade rules and concessions (such as the provisions for sub-Saharan Africa under the US–Africa Growth and Opportunity Act) are not clear. However, Clapham (2006) makes the wider point that although Chinese investment and demand is having a measurable effect of Africa's growth rates, for the most part, African countries remain inserted within the world economic system as a supplier of raw materials and consumer of manufactured goods, and thus in a position of ongoing postcolonial weakness (see also Tull 2006).

Conclusions

Deepening Sino–African relations are one indicator of a changing world order. The West's diplomatic, political and economic hegemony, while far from seriously threatened, is subject to an increasingly visible challenge. China is seeking increasing trade, investment, diplomatic missions and geopolitical alliances across the world. The outcomes will be socially, politically, economically and environmentally profound. As important as the actual material shape and impacts of China's rise (such as decreasing prices for consumer goods, competition for oil, the environmental impacts of its growing economy, or its programme of military development) will be the way in which Western governments, and most obviously the USA, perceive, construct and respond to the fact of China's growth (Arrighi 2005a, b; Johnston 2003; C. Pan 2006). There is a strong tendency to simplify and even demonise China, demonstrated in the growing number of popular alarmist accounts (e.g. Gertz 2002; Menges 2005; Mosher 2000; Timperlake and Triplett 2002), but also present within some foreign policy circles (see Johnston 2003). Africa is one arena in which economic and diplomatic competition is being played out. There are, of course, very real concerns, whether from a progressive standpoint (e.g. in terms of human rights and dignity, environmental futures, or participation and democracy), or, at the opposite end of what is a complex spectrum, from a realist international relations position (e.g. China as an aggressive competitor for resources, and potentially a future military threat, eventually seeking hegemonic power). But as this very brief review of Sino–African relations shows, any understanding of these emerging geographies are aided by a fuller

appreciation of historical underpinnings; of multi-dimensional relations (not just oil or authoritarian regimes); of complex actors (noting the divisions and tensions within the Chinese and African states, people and companies); of the agency of African actors; and, not least, through considerably more humility regarding the West's past and present relations with Africa. For different Africans and African countries, China brings a range of benefits as well as problems, and China will undoubtedly become an ever more important factor in the continent's future. For the rest of the world, Sino-African relations, and how the West responds to them, may act as a very important marker of the changing geographies of power – and how these will be resisted or embraced.

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Biography

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Notes

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¹ China's longstanding relations with different African countries have often been under-represented in Western accounts and analyses. Brautigam (1998), for example, observes that the vast majority of Western development textbooks do not mention the PRC's development-based interactions with different African countries. Some of the surge of contemporary writing on Sino-African relations – this piece included – perhaps represent a belated recognition of geopolitical and economic patterns that are easily neglected in Eurocentric academic and policy circles.

² Most famously, this has been pursued through the debate over whether China is a 'status quo' or 'revisionist' power. For critical analyses of this debate, see Johnston (2003) and C. Pan (2006).

³ Far more detailed accounts can be found in Hutchinson (1975), Yu (1975), Yahuda (1978), Camilleri (1980), Snow (1988, 1994), Brautigam (1998), Taylor (1998, 2000, 2006) and Alden

(2005b). Official Chinese accounts of the history of Sino–African relations can be found on the China–Africa Cooperation Forum website (see below).

⁴ Different authors suggest slightly different periodisations. Van de Looy (2006), for example, suggests a first period while initial relations were established between China and African states as they gained independence; then from 1971 (the point at which China gained a permanent seat on the UN Security Council); and then the ‘post-Maoist’ period.

⁵ Yahuda (1978, 28) quotes Mao speaking in 1923: ‘The “Council of Ministers” of the Chinese Government is really both accommodating and agreeable. If one of our foreign masters farts, it is a lovely perfume. If our foreign masters want to export cotton, the Council of Ministers thereupon abolishes the prohibition of the export of cotton; if our foreign masters want to bring in cigarettes, the Council of Ministers thereupon “instructs several provinces by telegram to stop levying taxes on cigarettes. Again, I ask my 400 million brethren to ponder a little. Isn’t it true that the Chinese Government is the counting house of our foreign masters’.

⁶ Competition for diplomatic recognition with the Republic of China remains a key foreign policy goal for China in Africa (Payne and Veney 1998), although at present to all intents and purposes it has been achieved with only a handful of small African nations maintaining formal ties with Taipei.

⁷ However, other commentators point to a preference for ‘turn key’ projects, and low levels of integration with domestic institutions, as well as low participation of project beneficiaries (see Brautigam 1998). Having said that, Brautigam agrees with the distinctiveness of Chinese aid compared to Western Overseas Development Aid (ODA) structures, agendas and cultures.

⁸ While this article is mainly concerned with state–state relations, it should be noted that a number of commentators raise the question of cultural differences and racial tensions between individual Chinese and Africans. See Snow (1988) and Gillespie (2001).

⁹ This article is interesting for its partisan assumption that the global economy should work in the interests of the West, and that assertions of sovereignty on the part of other countries or alliances (e.g. OPEC), are ‘undue’ and represent ‘blackmailing’. It recalls the quip about ‘their country on top of our oil!’

¹⁰ The FOCAC met again in Addis Adaba in 2003, while the most recent meeting, in 2006 in Beijing, was attended by no less than 41 African heads of state. At this meeting, trade agreements worth \$1.9 billion were approved, and China offered \$5 billion in loans and credits, as well as a further \$5 billion to encourage Chinese ventures in Africa. The meeting was a huge display of diplomatic theatre, which although sometimes misjudged by the Chinese (with rather too much emphasis on ‘exotic’ and ‘tribal’ Africa), was nonetheless a demonstrably important marker of present relations.

¹¹ The full text of the Declaration can be found at: http://english.people.com.cn/english/200010/12/eng20001012_52436.html (retrieved 19 December 2005).

¹² The full text of this speech can be found at: http://english.people.com.cn/english/200010/10/eng20001010_52238.html (retrieved 19 December 2005).

¹³ However, this case is entirely consistent with China’s determined stance on the Republic of China, which Sata had threatened to recognise, should he come to power. He also made inflammatory statements about the presence of Chinese businesses and workers in Zambia.

¹⁴ Although the irony of a member of the Bush government with neoconservative affiliations talking about ‘responsible power’ is, of course, striking.

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